

The Day When Hamilton Changed the World

150 years ago revival broke out and swept the world. Hamilton, Ontario, played a significant role in what eventually became known as the Third Great Awakening.

by **Daina Doucet**

History books only briefly examine it, and Hamilton's official history makes little mention of it. There are no statues, plaques or historic markers, but Hamilton, Ontario, played a central role in world-changing events of the mid-1800s.



Phoebe Palmer

Few realize that what happened there 150 years ago had a major influence on such significant historic events as:

- a cessation of crime in Ireland and Wales;
- the rehabilitation of more than 1,000 prostitutes in London, England;
- recognition of women's rights;
- a powerful call for the abolishment of slavery in the American South;
- improved laws in many nations to assist and care for the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast;
- the founding of the YMCA;
- the founding of the Salvation Army.

These events all hearken back to a short, but intense, three-year revival of faith in God. Beginning in Hamilton in October 1857, revival rapidly spread to New York City, and then throughout the United States, Great Britain, South Africa and other nations around the globe.

The Hamilton Spectator's former religion columnist, the late Charles Wilkinson, wrote in 1981 about the revival's profound worldwide impact, crediting Hamilton as the place where the revival, now known as the Third Great Awakening, began.

Revival historian Dr. Richard Riss of New Jersey supports this conclusion and stated in an interview that the first known and recorded report of the revival's effects originated in Hamilton.

How it started

In October 1857 a handful of people from Hamilton's Methodist church under the leadership of Phoebe Palmer, a firebrand Methodist preacher and the wife of a prominent New York City physician/lay minister, met to pray for revival. On opening day of the series of prayer meetings 21 people were spiritually transformed, and within the next few days, a total of 400. Hamilton's *Daily Spectator*, absorbed with international news, did not realize that a small, but history-shaping event was occurring on its very doorstep.



Hamilton's First Methodist Church

The event's significance, however, did not escape a New York City paper that received news of Hamilton's revival in November. Historian Dr. Edwin Orr refers to the New York paper's description of the events in Hamilton: "The work is taking within its range persons of all classes, men of low degree and men of high estate of wealth and position; old men and maidens, and even little children are seen humbly kneeling together pleading for grace. The mayor of the city, with other persons of like position, are not ashamed to be seen bowed at the altar there beside the humble servant."

New York City awakens

Orr firmly believed that the Awakening spread from Hamilton to New York City. He says, "Spiritual awakenings are exceedingly infectious, and proximity in time and place adds to the stimulation of desire for similar blessing." According to Wilkinson's 1981 article, "just a description of one revival

was sufficient to launch another as people prayed that they too might experience the same blessings.”

Yet this perspective is contested. Others believe that in response to prayer the revival broke out spontaneously in several locations at about the same time; Hamilton being one location, and New York being another. By the middle of October 1857 New York’s famous Fulton Street lunchtime meetings - precursors to revival in that city - were being held daily. Seven months later there were 96,000 new believers in New York alone.

But other events also contributed to the revival’s growth in the U.S. In October 1857 the stock market collapsed suddenly resulting in financial panic, loss of employment and famine that drew many to the prayer meetings. Within five months more than 6,000 attended daily, and newspapers carried daily front-page coverage of similar meetings across the United States. A later report stated that the Awakening drew as many as 50,000 new converts weekly and that for a period of two years churches added 10,000 names weekly to their membership lists.

Several features that distinguish the Hamilton revival, however, typify the ‘Awakening’ as it was manifest throughout the world: it was characterized by prayer, not preaching, and spread through lay people, not the clergy.

The Methodist connection

In 1857 Hamilton and its surrounding areas, specifically Grimsby, were Methodist strongholds. Grimsby Park, fronting Lake Ontario, had become the ‘Chautauqua of Canada’ with the Ontario Methodist Camp Meeting Ground attracting high-profile preachers and thousands of campers each summer.

The revival's impact on the four Methodist churches was formidable. They ... eventually grew 1000-percent in attendance.

The Methodist church had already formed alliances that would eventually become the United Church. Four churches in particular represented the backbone of revival for the city: Wesley, Centenary, Zion, and First-United. Coupled with the fact that Hamilton’s Awakening was closely linked to the Methodist church through Phoebe Palmer, the revival in the Hamilton area remained within the Methodist camp.

Describing the local revival in an unpublished paper, Rev. Bruce Woods of Hamilton, former pastor of Stanley Avenue Baptist Church, writes: “The Baptists and Presbyterians were largely untouched. Anglicans remained coldly aloof. Only after the divine visitation had come and gone did others awaken to the magnitude of the events that had transpired in their midst.”

The revival’s impact on the four Methodist churches was formidable. They could accommodate up to 5,000 people, and eventually grew 1000-percent in attendance. Meetings followed a

traditional Methodist model eliciting intense and fervent responses of repentance and commitment. "General misgivings about Methodist enthusiasm caused many to forego the opportunity to witness the very thing that Christians usually approve of when they are viewed at a distance in church history," writes Woods. Revival services consisted of a salvation and sanctification message accompanied by "an invitation to receive the fullness of the Spirit which they called the baptism of fire," and testimonies of spiritual transformation.

Wildfire

Even though locally the revival remained a Methodist experience, internationally it reached across denominations. When in the wake of the Hamilton revival Phoebe Palmer and her husband Walter launched a world-wide ministry, they carried the revival throughout the world. England's Awakening began in 1859 during the Palmer's visit to Northumberland where believers had been praying for revival since hearing news of the outpouring in North America. Through the Palmers ministry, English churches added a million new converts to their membership rolls, criminal activities abated, and a number of influential Christian leaders emerged.

Two preachers from Ulster crossed the ocean to bring a spark of revival back to Ireland where it generated 100,000 new believers and produced lasting moral change. During 1860 no crimes were reported, no prisoners were held in custody, and Ulster judges were out of work.

By May 1859 the revival also reached Africa where the Zulu and Bantu tribes and the Dutch Reformed Church experienced powerful moves of God with supernatural manifestations of God's presence. The result was deep conviction of sin, repentance, conversions, fervent prayer and bold evangelism.

Spiritual effects of the Awakening

The Awakening influenced not only nations, but generations. As a result of the Awakening, many notable Christian leaders launched ministries that continue to have an impact on the world today. Phoebe Palmer's preaching broke through religious traditions and at a time when women didn't preach, Palmer became a role model. She sharply criticized the repression of women in the Church, and her example inspired many women to take a more active role in ministry, among them, Catharine Booth who together with her husband William co-founded the Salvation Army. Others upon whom the revival had a profound effect continue to be regarded as fathers of our faith.

Palmer's influence even extends into Church practices today.

These Christian leaders include:

- Dwight Moody, evangelist and founder of the YMCA;

- medical missionary Dr. David Livingstone;
- philanthropist and a social worker, Thomas Barnardo, founder of an orphanage for the children of London's slums, many of whom later immigrated to Canada;
- Henry Ward Beecher, the American preacher who championed anti-slavery, temperance, and the right of women to vote;
- and Charles Spurgeon, the famous London preacher.

Palmer's influence even extends into Church practices today. She coined the phrase "baptism in the Holy Spirit," terminology foundational to the 20th century Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. She was also the first to emphasize that believers could be filled with the Holy Spirit and empowered by God to do the works and miracles of Jesus.

Undeniably, the Third Great Awakening was a powerful influence on social and spiritual development in the 20th century, and Hamilton played a leading role. In the words of Bruce Woods, it was one of those "special times when the Spirit moves men in large numbers. If those days ever come again, we will do well to participate while we can."

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